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Colorado's pioneer yak ranchers treat their majestic animals like family

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Lynda Gehring, at High Country Critters, walks alongside a bull yak named Thor after he came up for his
JERILEE BENNETT/THE GAZETTE

Move slowly. That's the first thing you learn here. The yaks don't like sudden movements.

Lynda Gehring models her advice well. The sun is coming out on this cool and windy this morning, so Lynda takes off her puffy jacket and gently places it on a table near the barn. She wonders out loud if it might blow away, as the movement might bother her babies.

She's careful, too, when she moves to the gate and cups her hands to her mouth to bellow, "Coooome, yaks!"

It's time for breakfast.

There's no sight of them at first. It takes a few yells for the furry animals to appear from out in the 35 acres of fields. They move slowly, too.

Lynda greets the yaks one by one. “Hey, Yahoo Blue,” she says warmly with a big smile. “Oh, and there’s Yolissa,” she says like a kindergarten teacher welcoming her students.



Photos by Jerilee Bennett/The Gazette

A young calf rests his mouth on a board after getting his fill of hay. Over 20 years ago, when Lynda and Mike Gehring started yak ranching near Black Forest, there were only 10 yak ranchers in the state. Now, there are more like 80 and Colorado is considered a hotbed for raising yaks.

JERILEE BENNETT/THE GAZETTE

She gives nearly all of her yaks names that start with “Y.” She has a list of 80 to use. They range from Yozan to Yuly to Yenna to Yetta James to the littlest yak, a 3-month-old named Yusain Bolt.

The rest of the yaks take their sweet time walking up to the barn.

“They’ll come,” Lynda says. “If I’m going to call them up, they know they’re getting some to eat.”

While they take bites of hay, Lynda reminisces on when she and her husband, Mike, started all this. It was 21 years ago when they got their first yaks and became the first yak ranchers in El Paso County. Back then, there were only 10 yak ranchers in the state. Now, there are more like 80 and Colorado is considered a hotbed for raising the Tibetan cattle, distinguished from cows by their long hair and fluffy tails. Lynda says the high elevation and cold weather work well for yaks.

Back then, the couple knew they wanted land and animals, specifically “something a little different,” Lynda says.

They went to an exotic animal show and discovered yaks and that they were economical. Three yaks require the amount of food it takes to feed one.

That was all it took.

The couple got married 28 years ago and met long before that when they grew up 14 miles away from each other in Wisconsin, where Mike grew up on a dairy farm.

“I would say we both have a knack for animals,” Mike says.



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Mike and Lynda Gehring treat their yak herd like family. Mike nuzzles with one of the female yaks at High Country Critters on Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020. Over 20 years ago, when Lynda and Mike Gehring started yak ranching near Black Forest there were only 10 yak ranchers in the state. Now, there are more like 80 and Colorado is considered a hotbed for raising yaks. Yaks come from Tibet and thrive in a high altitude, cold environment. (Photo by Jerilee Bennett, The Gazette)

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On their ranch, called High Country Critters, it looks like they certainly do. It's full of horses and golden retrievers. Mike and Lynda never had kids, but that's the label that fits for their yaks.

“We see them as our family,” Lynda said. “You get very attached to them, so it's hard when they leave.”

Just like family might, she knows their birthdays and their personalities. She sends Christmas cards with their pictures. She knows where they like to be scratched. She knows to feed them garlic to keep the flies away. When she can't tell one from the other, Mike quickly fills in the name. They know the boys are more friendly and the girls take longer to warm up to you. They know which ones are sassy and which ones need more love. They say things like, "Just relax" and "Aren't you a pretty girl?" When the yaks need more calming down, Lynda sings to them. They say some yaks are afraid of people, but you can't sense any fear here.

"They really trust us," Lynda said. "And that's just from basically talking to them and staying calm."



JERILEE BENNETT/THE GAZETTE

Nearly all the yaks at Lynda and Mike Gehring's yak ranch have names that start with "Y." They range from Yozan to Yuly to Yenna to Yetta James to the littlest yak, a 3-month-old named Yusain Bolt.

JERILEE BENNETT/THE GAZETTE

The Gehrings have become parents of sorts for the Colorado yak ranching community. Lynda, also a dog breeder, keeps detailed notes about the pedigrees of each yak. She's helped many ranches around the state get their start. There's Hey-Hey Yak Ranch in Cañon City and Grunniens Yak Ranch in Elbert, for example.

Along with selling calves, ranchers make a profit off the yaks' hair.

Their meat, a sweeter comparison to bison, is gaining popularity, but that's not the direction Lynda wants to go in. Though they have butchered a couple yaks that were declining.

"That was hard after so many years," Lynda said. "I just told them, 'We fed you for so many years. Now it's time for you to feed us.'"

Their life together seems like a normal family, but it's not lost that it's a little weird to have yaks in this Black Forest neighborhood. Most weekends, they host private tours for people who want a look.

Lynda gets it.

"They really are beautiful animals," she says. "They're majestic. I never get tired of looking at them."